Poverty as a “Theme Park”: Christian Norms and Philanthropic Forms of Habitat for Humanity

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Habitat for Humanity’s newly created Global Village and Discovery Center presents visitors with a stark contrast between replicas of poor urban housing and new Habitat-built model homes. Inadvertently dubbed a “Slum Theme Park” by its creators, the village and center, on 2.5 acres just outside the organization’s international headquarters in Americus, Georgia, is intended to provide middle-class Americans the chance to personally experience conditions of poverty in the developing world. It is also intended to gather funds and attract volunteers for Habitat’s international housing efforts. This article explores the meaning and practices of the Global Village and Discovery Center and attempts to understand its principal motivations. It engages different attributes of the project using a variety of theoretical models: the concept of the “tourist gaze”; the theming of entertainment and heritage parks in general; notions of American volunteerism and philanthropy; and the idea of the urban danger zone as a tourist site. In attempting to connect the literature on development with that on tourism, it concludes by suggesting the project may be viewed as representing both forms of “creative destruction” and “destructive creation.”

A voyage is now proposed to visit a distant people on the other side of the globe, not to cheat them, not to rob them . . . but merely to do them good and make them as far as in our power lies, to live as comfortably as ourselves.

— Benjamin Franklin

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Americus is a small town tucked away on the plains of Sumter County, Georgia. After passing through vast stretches of empty fields and quiet houses, the town, with a population of approximately 17,000 people, provides a sharp contrast to its rural surroundings.
The county seat, it also contains a few banks, a community college, and several hotels. According to the last census, however, Americus and its surroundings are one of Georgia's poorest areas, with almost 28 percent of its population, who are predominantly African American, living below the poverty line.

The most important buildings in Americus are scattered over a number of city blocks that constitute the world headquarters of Habitat for Humanity. A Christian charity group engaged in building and improving housing around the world, Habitat was founded by Millard and Linda Fuller in 1976. Since then, it has built more than 150,000 houses, providing shelter for about half a million needy people around the world. As the organization has expanded its operations worldwide, it has also expanded its presence in Americus. Today Habitat workers declare proudly that their organization has been able to eradicate substandard housing from Sumter County. As one drives through the quiet streets near its international headquarters, one notices entire areas consisting only of Habitat for Humanity offices and dormitories for visiting volunteers. They give weight not just to the organization’s operations, but to its importance to the city itself.

At the end of one street is a site that is sure to catch anyone’s attention: a collection of dilapidated shacks and squat-
Village. Each shack here is meant to represent the conditions under which poor people live in selected developing countries (fig. 4). The structures, themselves, however, are built with the relatively sturdy American system of 2x4 stud walls, covered with an ad-hoc sheathing of rusted corrugated metal and other materials (fig. 5). Various signs here, both inside and outside the shacks, describe the diseases, pests, and climatic conditions that real residents of such countries are subject to, and pieces of furniture or equipment, often imported from the countries themselves, are carefully arranged to give a better sense of the life there. It is obvious great pains have been taken to authentically replicate the living conditions of poor people in developing countries. In one instance, a pile of tar lies abandoned by the side of a walkway. In another, metal pails filled with water are left under a poorly constructed water tap (fig. 6). Together, all these components aim to re-create the total environment in the villages, or slums, of the developing world.

At the far end of the Global Village, the dirt path emerges into an open field. Here a large sign welcomes visitors to the other part of the Global Village, that which displays Habitat for Humanity prototype housing from around the world. Most of the “Slum Theme Park” is, in fact, devoted to this showcase of Habitat for Humanity housing (figs. 7–11). Each house represents the model that Habitat has developed for a particular country, with its cost and construction materials listed on a signboard outside, which indicate a range of costs from $3,000 for a one-room house to $6,000 for a four-room house. Inside, each house contains culturally appropriate furnishings. Each also contains a stamping seal so each person’s “visit” to such countries as Kenya and Haiti may be recorded in his or her complimentary passport. In addition to the individual houses, there are also general exhibits. For example, a hand-operated machine displays how bricks can be made. And, toward the end of the tour, visitors are shown houses still under construction.

**Figure 3.** A) Cover of Habitat for Humanity passport for the Global Village and Discovery Center. B) Inside of Habitat of Humanity passport. C) Map of the Global Village and Discovery Center as presented in the passport.

**Figure 4.** Shacks in the poverty-housing section of the Global Village.
such as the prototype Indian and the Sri Lankan houses. Signs outside these list the cultural considerations taken into account during the building process itself.

From every angle within the prototype areas, the squat-ter settlement looms in the background, a tumbledown centerpiece surrounded by sturdy, well-kept structures. Visitors are told that more prototype housing will be added to the Global Village in the future. However, the only proposed addition to the slum-housing section will be an example of American poverty-housing consisting of a run-down trailer home. This will be matched with a small, but sturdy tract house (FIG.12).

At the end of their visit to the Global Village, visitors are led back to the Discovery Center. Here two adjacent rooms show continuous videos, and display flashing images of poverty around the world, matched by images of philanthropic work being carried out by Habitat’s international volunteers. Finally, before leaving the center, visitors pass a small gift shop where they can buy souvenirs.

Throughout this journey, the slum/squatter settlement is referred to as a village. However, by the end of a tour it becomes evident that what are being portrayed are not rural dwellings but the slum and squatter-like dwellings of the urban poor (FIG.13).

After leaving the Global Village and Discovery Center, one is left asking why Habitat would build such a theme park here, and what purposes the park serves for the organization. Clearly, the park is intended to play a major role in the future economic life of Americus, plagued with some of the lowest per-capita incomes in the state. But the “Slum Theme Park” also seems intended to play an important role in the life of the organization itself.

INTERROGATING THE SLUM THEME PARK

This article attempts to answer the questions above and explore the more general meaning and practices of Habitat’s Global Village and Discovery Center. The materials used here to understand Habitat’s intent include printed documents and brochures, the various signs placed on the site, and material posted on the organization’s official websites. In addition to reviewing this literature, the article will engage
One possible narrative that emerges from these four concepts allows the Habitat theme park to be viewed as a “development” project. Literature on development presents a wealth of case studies of how nonprofit organizations in the West potentially serve the urban poor of the global South. But such literature remains very sketchy in terms of relating these issues to discourses on tourism. The Slum Theme Park is an excellent site to begin making these connections.

Through an analysis of issues of theming, the article also attempts to unpack the ways Habitat encourages volunteerism—a practice which may be seen as implicitly absolving the state of its responsibility to provide basic shelter for its citizens. Simultaneously, however, through its theming of poverty, the park exploits images of poverty without addressing its root causes. In doing so, the park confuses slums with squatting practices, in the process dismissing the complex socioeconomic and cultural factors by which the poor overcome poverty. Through such practices, Habitat for Humanity has also fed into a conservative agenda of charitable giving to the deserving poor. Ultimately, therefore, the Slum Theme Park represents not only a perversion of poverty conditions but a reassertion of a neoliberal agenda of altruism, which seeks to cushion the effects of globalization rather than challenge them.

Finally, this article engages in a discussion of the specific biases that may possibly be inherent in the practices of American philanthropy as applied to the field of development.

the Slum Theme Park using a variety of theoretical models. These will include the concept of tourist gaze, the theming of entertainment and heritage parks in general, notions of American volunteerism and philanthropy, and the idea of the urban danger zone as a tourist site.

**Figure 7.** A) Welcome signs to model homes of Latin America. B) Welcome signs to model homes of Africa and the Middle East.

**Figure 8.** Botswana Housing.

**Figure 9.** Tanzania Housing.
with regard to the urban poor of the Third World. Issues of citizenship and the role of First World volunteers in addressing poverty are also problematized. Overall, therefore, the article hopes to explore the complex relationship between First World do-gooders and the Third World needy (fig. 14).

THE SLUM THEME PARK AS A CONCEPT AND REALITY

The financing and construction of the Global Village and Discovery Center has been an arduous task for Habitat for Humanity. Contributions of $1.3 million have so far supported the effort since construction began in May 2002, and this number is expected eventually to reach $5 million. The organization stresses the fact that none of this money was siphoned off from its work overseas. Rather, special donations have been used to construct the park. Credit has, of course, been given: those able to finance an entire prototype house have had their names printed on the appropriate marker signs (fig. 15). Those who have pledged smaller amounts have had their names inscribed on the donor wall.

As a “theme park,” the Global Village and Discovery Center would seem an unlikely tourist attraction. Every year, however, 10,000 people visit Habitat for Humanity’s headquarters. Many are retired people or members of school groups, coming to learn about poverty housing. Others visit while touring sites related to former President Carter. The organization hopes the theme park will allow it to attract more people, particularly from the latter group. Many people are unaware of Habitat for Humanity’s work, and the park is designed to encourage them to get involved in housing the poor of the world. Of course, not everyone is enthusiastic about the park and its ideals. According to tour guides, many people who come through the park are skeptical about the organization’s mission, and about poverty-alleviation in general.


FIGURE 11. Model of shared public toilet solution.

FIGURE 12. A reminder of poor housing in America too.

FIGURE 13. Squatter shacks, not slums, serve as the real inspiration for the themed poverty housing in the park.
In addition, Habitat sees the park as a way to boost the local economy. A special train that connects various tourist sites in Georgia will soon make a stop at Habitat for Humanity. This should not only dramatically increase the number of people visiting the Global Village and Discovery Center, but it should provide a boost to other businesses in Americus. Addressing concern for a lack of audience, Millard Fuller has anticipated that approximately 70,000 people would visit the park in its first year of operation. And according to its executive director, most people traveling through that part of Georgia are socially aware because of their interest in Jimmy Carter, and would find it worthwhile to visit the park. Already, the park has welcomed some 10,000 visitors, and it welcomes approximately 1,500 to 2,000 new visitors per month — which, according to its executive director, is right on target. With the introduction of the special train, this number should double. The University of Georgia has anticipated the park could have a $7.7 million annual impact on the local economy of Americus and Sumter County. And in its promotional material, Habitat has claimed the park is intended to benefit both itself and the local economy and tourism industry.

Nevertheless, marketing the Global Village and Discovery Center as a place to learn about Habitat for Humanity and global poverty has been a challenge. Initially, the organization attempted to describe the park as a museum of housing issues. And, ironically, it was not until it moved away from the term “museum” to the more catchy “Slum Theme Park” — at first only as part of a casual reference by Millard Fuller — that tourism reporters became interested and began writing reviews of it for their newspapers. The organization, though uncomfortable with the term, continues to use it as a way to provoke increased visitation. Once visitors are on site, the organization hopes to change their views and entice them to either donate to the organization or join one of its programs.

One tour guide mentioned how it is technically inappropriate to call the Global Village and Discovery Center a Slum Theme Park. “It doesn’t have rides and it is not meant to be only fun. It is meant to show Americans how most of the world lives.” She went on to explain how the new model homes of the Global Village may appear primitive, but that Third World residents today live in much the same way Americans did during the eighteenth century. Habitat is attempting to improve their standard of living to the equivalent of America in the early twentieth century, she said. The guide, however, revealed a very important aspect of the park — that the squatter shacks had to be rebuilt several times to finally withstand the weather. This underscored how theming lies at the heart of the operation. To maintain structures built with corrugated sheet metal and 2x4s is easier than using more authentic materials such as thatched roofs.
THEMED ENVIRONMENTS AND THEME PARKS

As with any themed environment, the Slum Theme Park attempts to simulate reality in a sterilized environment. Fuller, in an interview recorded for the Habitat website, claims that because people cannot go to countries such as Kenya, Tanzania and India, the organization must bring aspects of those countries to America. In this simulation of various countries and their substandard dwellings, however, the actual inhabitants are absent. Instead, pictures of inhabitants living in such poor areas and ominous signs stating such facts as “1.2 billion people live in poverty around the world” are presented to visitors. The park thus enables poverty to be viewed from a safe distance. Visitors may travel through the countries and their “slums” without having to encounter any real danger — or, for that matter, having to confront the real people who live in these environments. In this way Habitat for Humanity is able to manipulate the tourist experience to gain visibility and solicit donations.

In fact, it would be detrimental to allow real people to live in the park. Aside from having to meet building codes, real slum dwellers would create a negative experience for visitors. In a similar vein, making the place too authentic real slum dwellers would create a negative experience for visitors. The park thus enables this way Habitat for Humanity is able to manipulate the tourist experience to gain visibility and solicit donations.

In one newspaper interview, a park official noted,

“We had to make sure it didn’t look too nice, but it also had to be safe. At a certain point, we had to stop making it too realistic. We can’t have stagnant water and naked children running around.”

One gets an uncanny feeling walking through this so-called slum. Dilapidated buildings and streets strewn with fake tar are experienced without any unpleasant odor or the possibility of stepping on unsanitary or dangerous objects. Even protruding hazards are neatly labeled to draw attention to the sorts of things slum dwellers must live with daily. Poverty is thus created as a sanitized theme through which people can construct modern identities vis-à-vis an underdeveloped other.

Scott Lash and John Urry have argued that the experience of modernity is fundamentally based on the experience of movement, and central to this experience has been the social organization of travel. This includes not just the aspect of moving people from one place to another, but packaging places for the consumption by visitors. In this regard, Mike Robinson has pointed out that tourism is a First World ideology, and that most of the people engaging in tourist activities are overwhelmingly from the First World. There are global impacts to this hegemony of First World tourism:

Tourists, by virtue of their ability to “gaze,” effectively reaf-
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In fact, it is precisely this ability to consume places of difference that allows for the full realization of the experience of modernity. Dean MacCannell has argued that it is through production and consumption of tourism that the modern subject is created. Thus, the growing attraction of disparate areas of urban centers, or of violent acts of crime, are central to the creation of an “us vs. them” dichotomy — or as MacCannell has put it, that allows the “insider/outsider” dualism to play out. The performance of tourism, therefore, is not simply about the consuming of places, but about Orientalizing the other in order to create one’s own identity. As MacCannell has pointed out:

“A touristic attitude of respectful admiration is called forth by the finer attractions, the monuments, and a no less important attitude of disgust attaches itself to the uncontro-
trolled garbage heaps, muggings, abandoned and tumble-
down buildings, polluted rivers and the like. Disgust over these items is the negative pole of respect for the monu-
ments. Together, the two provide a moral stability to the modern touristic consciousness that extends beyond imme-
diate social relationships to the structure and organization of the total society.”

The idea of what tourists consume and who they are has been the subject of research by many distinguished scholars. For example, John Urry has captured the complexity of the encounter between visitors and locals both in the everyday and the extraordinary practices of public space.

Tourism results from the basic binary division between the ordinary/everyday and the extraordinary. Tourism experi-
ences involve some aspect or element that induces pleasur-
able experiences which, by comparison with the everyday, are out of the ordinary. This is not to say that other ele-
ments of the production of the tourist experience will not make the typical tourist feel that he or she is “home from home,” not too much “out of place.” But potential objects of the tourist gaze must be different in some way or other.

Urry has also discussed the importance of tourists being able to see everyday aspects of social life carried out in unusu-
al contexts, or ordinary activities taking place in unusual envi-
ronments. Hence, the character of the gaze is central to tourism, and is linked more generally to the character of con-
sumption. The objects of daily use placed in the houses by Habitat for Humanity, therefore, attempt not only to capture the lives of the absent inhabitants, but also to present them as objects of consumption for visitors.

Urry has further written that what is important in seek-
ing satisfaction is not so much the consumption of products,
but the anticipation stemming from imaginative pleasure-seeking. Hence, post-Fordism plays a key role in the development of theme parks and themed environments. But this gaze, as Nezar AlSayyad has pointed out, differs from place to place. In particular, AlSayyad has called the process by which people engage with the built environment, and are engaged by it, “engazement.” He has defined this as “the process through which the gaze transforms the material reality of the built environment into a cultural imaginary.” While the desire of people to view environments vastly different from theirs is not a new phenomenon, the proliferation and scale at which environments are being themed and designed today to lure consumers is far greater than ever before. In a post-Fordist economy, and particularly a consumer society, consumption of objects and people has become an essential part of everyday life. The Slum Theme Park, therefore, is readily accepted by many people as a space where those who cannot afford to travel can “discover” the world and “learn” about the social and cultural conditions of different countries.

David Clarke has described the ways in which current forms of consumption differ from those exercised before. In making the connection between society and consumption, he noted:

Consumption is no longer just one aspect of society amongst others. In a fully fledged consumer society, consumption performs a role that keeps the entire social system ticking over.

Indeed, the shock factor associated with looking at “authentic” depictions of the appalling conditions in which many of the world’s poorest people live is fundamental to not only bringing tourists to the Global Village, but also encouraging them to contribute to Habitat for Humanity. In this regard, the so-called slums are representations not only of poverty, but also of un-modernity. Volunteers, therefore, not only bring hope to “God’s people” (as the promotional video states), but progress to the materially backward and politically repressed. Because of this, it is equally important to recognize the historical realities and political economy behind the rise of theming and heritage discourses.

AlSayyad has also noticed that while the First World and Third World are both interested in the “other,” they have fundamentally different motivations. He attributed this difference to earlier relationships of colonialism, political nationalism, and economic dependency. In particular, “the First World appears more interested in consuming the cultures and environments of Third World societies by reminding us that the First World nations, organizations and individuals are the main advocates and financial patrons for the preservation of Third World built environments as part of a ‘universal’ heritage that the ‘natives’ may not appreciate.” Yet in doing so, these same organizations are also uncomfortable with many of the social practices within those societies whose traditions and norms they claim to want to preserve. This is especially the case when these diverge from “established Western standards of human rights, gender equality and environmental sustainability.” It is possible in this vein to view Habitat for Humanity as such an organization which is engaged in “doing good” for the unfortunate Southern “other.”

PROBLEMATIZING THE SLUM THEME PARK IN AN AGE OF CONSUMERISM

How do we start to experience poverty, and how do we start to relate to the housing conditions of the world’s poor? I will now shift the analysis to a framework based on development studies. Jorge Haroy and David Satterwaite have pointed out that housing is only an aspect of poverty, not the cause of it. Thus, the poor are more concerned with improving their overall economic condition than they are with paying full attention to their form of shelter. Housing is thus best understood as an ongoing process of improvement over time.

Policy-makers and so-called “housers” who place emphasis on a finished product misunderstand this relation between poverty and housing when they insist on an instant finished product. What is even more problematic with regard to Habitat for Humanity is its stated goal “to eliminate all substandard housing from the face of the earth.” This is not just unrealistic in scope and scale, but naive in its understanding of housing processes and policies and the complexities of poverty and informality.

Janice Perlman has long argued that urban residents labeled “marginal” are not disenfranchised from the city around them. In fact, they are a deeply integrated part of urban society, and strive to improve their lives continuously. Squatting is one practice these so-called marginals employ in their attempt to make a living. The Habitat theme park, however, fails to represent any of this sense of agency on the part of poor people. In part by invoking the label “Slum Theme Park,” rather than “Squatter Theme Park,” Habitat is thus creating the illusion that the housing conditions of poor people in developing countries are caught in an irreversible process of deterioration.

By formal legal definition, slums are areas of cities whose structures do not meet building codes. They may have acquired this status because the structures have deteriorated over time, or because the code standards themselves have risen. But the very notion of a Slum Theme Park would seem to involve a concept of housing whose capacity for change and improvement is limited, and which rests on an implicit assumption that housing for the urban poor is a static physical reality, not a vibrant urban process. Indeed, in its representations at the theme park, Habitat does set housing up as the product of a never-ending cycle of poverty. According to this view, as a manifestation of permanent
poverty, the house can only be upgraded through the help of Western philanthropy.

Reconciling the aims of a housing theme park with a real discussion of agency among the urban poor would indeed be an arduous task. It might even conflict with the purposes of an organization that believes that improving housing conditions is a way to break the cycle of poverty. The subtext of the Habitat Discovery Center and Global Village is that people in developing countries have the same hopes and aspirations as people in America. And the only way to realize their hopes is to be able to live in a decent, finished house.

VOLUNTEERISM AND PHILANTHROPY

By the middle of the last decade of the twentieth century there were almost a million American philanthropic nonprofit bodies . . . the combined income of these organizations was more than $400 billion. Together they accounted for 6 per cent of the American GDP . . . and employed 8 million people.33

In the developing countries of the South, the so-called Third World, there has recently been a tremendous expansion in the number of voluntary self-help organizations. Today these nonprofit organizations help shape the discourse on poverty and the role of wealthy nations and individuals in the development of the urban poor.

In particular, Robert Bremner has written that ever since the beginning of the Republic, “Americans have regarded themselves as unusually philanthropic people.”34 During the twentieth century the celebration of American philanthropy reached great heights, as documented in newspapers and other chronicles of American public life. One may even say that the idea of “Doing Good in the world,” is a fundamentally American principle of life.35

Many consider Cotton Mather (1663–1728) to have been the father of American philanthropy. Mather regarded the performance of good works as an obligation owed to God, rather than a means of salvation. He argued that to help the unfortunate was an honor, a privilege, and an incomparable pleasure.36 In this sense, Habitat for Humanity’s theme park may be seen as a reflection of early-twenty-first-century American philanthropism. However, it is equally possible to see it as an example of how volunteer and nongovernmental organizations engage in projects to help the poor elsewhere, while preserving the self at the core.

According to a promotional video, the Global Village allows people to experience Habitat’s programs firsthand. And in describing these, one volunteer even invokes the philosophy of a “global ministry,” of a Biblical philosophy of helping others by carrying a “neighbor’s burden.”37

However, philanthropy today also provides a moral platform for Christian Westerners to engage in civilizing the East. Gayatri Spivak has argued that one basis for the colonial project was the idea that white men had the capacity to save brown women from brown men.38 In its efforts to improve the lot of the poor, the work of Habitat for Humanity is little different. Indeed, one may view its emblematic programs as a way for white middle-class Westerners, particularly in the U.S., to engage in saving the brown or black poor from their bureaucratic national states and failed housing apparatuses.

Such volunteer programs also allow the white middle class to achieve a sense of national identity vis-à-vis their dependent other. Thus, in a political system that gives tremendous tax breaks to the rich, the social welfare of the urban poor is left to faith-based groups under the rubric of “compassionate conservatism.”39 And volunteerism gives those who are haunted by their religious conscience an opportunity to reclaim their sense of lost citizenship from a political process that has marginalized them.

Volunteerism, itself, may be prompted by a number of factors. Among these are benevolence, justice and reciprocity, enlightened cherishing, respect for persons, self-direction, and moral leadership.40 However, it may be most appropriate to view the kind of volunteerism that distinguishes Habitat for Humanity as a continuation of the ideals of Jane Addams. A distaste for pauperism, as defined by the philosopher M.W. Martin, may best explain the work of Addams — and a century later that of Millard Fuller. Pauperism may be defined as a dependency of philanthropic recipients on the charity they receive. One result of such dependency is a lack of interest on the part of the recipient in any work or other activity that might improve their lives. This is precisely the attitude that Habitat for Humanity seeks to erase.41

A key element of Habitat for Humanity’s program is the use of sweat equity by the charity recipients themselves in addition to the contributions of the organization’s own volunteers. Habitat is explicit that their model of partnership requires a minimum input from the would-be owners. Its narrative is that the residents, alongside the volunteers, spend over 3,000 hours building a house. Habitat then “sells” the house to them at cost by means of a no-interest mortgage. Thus, not only are the new owners/residents required to invest their own sweat equity, they are obliged to make regular payments for their house over next twenty years. Default on a payment technically gives Habitat the right to foreclose and sell the house on the open market. And this is the case not only in the U.S. but in all of Habitat’s projects around the world. Hence, instead of getting assistance from the state, individuals end up indebted to a private philanthropy instead of a commercial bank.

One way to see the success of such a program is that it results from a convergence of social and political forces. On the one hand, the governments of many developing countries want to shift the burden of the urban poor onto the private sector. On the other, disenfranchised and predominantly middle-class Americans are offered a philanthropic activity
(building houses for poor people in foreign lands) that allows them to reclaim their sense of citizenship. Coupled with globalization processes and austerity policies, the Third World poor are left at the mercy of such projects, as the state continues to withdraw from any obligation to provide social services. A climate is thus created where philanthropy not only becomes a means by which middle-class volunteers may lay claim to American citizenship and Christian morality, but where volunteerism and philanthropy become the modus operandi for developing the global South.

THE SLUM THEME PARK AND THE TROPE OF THE URBAN JUNGLE

Observers of the contemporary city have described the late capitalist urban condition as characterized by a trend toward aestheticization, where the primacy of the visual and the centrality of the image have reduced the city to a landscape of visual consumption, an object to be gazed upon, or a spectacle. Current urban design practices are said to nourish this appeal or the embellishment of the material world by giving precedence of the facade to the creation of urbane disguises, thereby reducing the effect of much architecture to two dimensions.42

It is also possible to view Habitat’s Global Village and Discovery Center through the trope of urban danger zones, using the growing literature on the effects of political instability and violence on tourism, particularly to Asian cities.43 The majority of this work has focused on the rearticulation of touristic images, conceptions and fantasies about postcolonial Southeast Asia.44 Kathleen Adams, for one, has argued that the narrative images produced by “urban danger zone” travelers have recast the cities of the Third World as urban jungles,44 “Urban-danger-zone tourism is very much a product of the global era,” she has written. Fueled by global politics, the itineraries of danger-zone tourists are inspired by the imaginariness of tumultuous zones of poverty. As such, they have the capacity to subtly shift the sensibilities of their participants.43

It is possible to view the Slum Theme Park’s visitors as participants in this project. But unlike real travelers, visitors to the park seek to experience the local places of the poor urban Third World in simulated environments which will enable them to escape the repercussions of actual experience. The sense of authenticity and difference such people receive, therefore, consists entirely of visual experience, sanitized in every respect from other unpleasantries — olfactory or otherwise — that visitors to real urban danger zones encounter.

Adams used a passage from a novel by Alex Garland to capture the mindset of many danger-zone tourists:

I wanted to witness extreme poverty. I saw it as a necessary experience who wanted to appear worldly and inter-

esting. Of course witnessing poverty was the first to be ticked off the list. . . . Then I had to graduate to the more obscure stuff . . . tear gas . . . hearing gun shots fired, a brush with my own death.45

It is unlikely that the visitors to Habitat’s Slum Theme Park are interested in an equal level of danger, otherwise they would seek out the real slum sites that have inspired the park. However, one cannot ignore the fantasy allure of the urban danger zone as a possible motivation for their visit.

CONCLUDING THOUGHT: CREATIVE DESTRUCTION OR DESTRUCTIVE CREATION?

The representational aspect of human agency, or its absence, in the Slum Theme Park can be viewed as an application of the Marxist concept of creative destruction.46 But viewing the park outside of Habitat for Humanity’s own broader agenda would be inappropriate.

However, one may equally view the well-meaning efforts of Habitat for Humanity and its volunteers in the selective building of houses for poor families in the Third World as “destructive creation.” In this respect, the negative impact of philanthropic intent may be seen to outweigh the significance of actual physical structures added to the housing stock. By insisting that poor people in the Third World have the same aspirations as middle-class Americans, Habitat for Humanity is in effect collapsing all modes of survival into a linear understanding of “progress.” In particular, in this context money that could have been allocated by a poor family to other economic pursuits must be used to pay off the costs of a complete structure when there may be more pressing and immediate life demands.

One might liken the impact of the Slum Theme Park in this regard to that of a shopping mall. The suburban shopping mall, according to Margaret Crawford, managed not only to channel investment away from older urban areas, but to invert public space within an enclosed space of surveillance. In the process, it caused the degeneration of consumer space in the city center. However, the very process that once weakened downtown areas was ultimately reversed, as cities decided to incorporate the strategy of building malls into downtown revitalization plans.

Crawford’s example adds a twist to the straightforward application of the concepts of “creative destruction” and “destructive creation” to the case of the Slum Theme Park. Here also may lie the positive possibilities of Habitat’s park. The exercise of appropriating the culture and physical environments of the other (Third World squatters and Third World slums) to allow a volunteerist American middle class to achieve a sense of self-satisfaction and self-realization can ultimately be looked upon positively if it helps the margin or the periphery revitalize itself by mimicking some of the
strategies of the center or the core. But this is only possible if one were to view the relationship between the shacks of the theme park and the slums that inspired them in the same way one might view the positive impact of a regional mall within a campaign of inner-city revitalization.

When Habitat for Humanity completes a house, there is always a ritual Christening that involves the presentation of a Bible to the new owners at a moving-in ceremony. Similarly, by signing on to a mortgage program for the house, the poor recipients of philanthropic largesse are portrayed by Habitat organizers as the “lucky ones” or “the lucky family.” However, similar acts of philanthropy toward the neighbors are contingent on repayment of the original “loan,” because without such repayment, the local affiliate will run short of cash to fund similar projects in other parts of a settlement. The organization emphasizes that the provision of each unit is only a “small drop in the bucket.” But this may also be looked upon as a small drop of destructive creation in the bigger bucket of what is ultimately a process of creative destruction.

One can almost imagine the expressions of people traveling to Americus from one of the developing countries whose housing is depicted in the Global Village. However, history offers lessons here, for one may argue that a similar situation took place more than one hundred years ago at the Paris World Exposition of 1889. Among the many regular and symmetrical pavilions scattered over those exposition grounds one stood in strange contrast to the rest (fig. 16). The Egyptian exhibit was not only unusual in its “crooked” layout, but also because of its uncanny ability to represent the authenticity of Cairo by reproducing parts of the city down to their minutest detail. So accurate was the translation of Egyptian urban space to the Paris exhibition that the Egyptian delegation traveling to the Eighth International Congress of Orientalists were disturbed at the ability of the French to import not only donkeys, but also dirt with which to plaster the buildings to make them look more “authentically” Cairene. However, upon entering a mosque, the Egyptian scholars found that the carefully replicated facade hid an interior space containing a café with men and women dancing to music. And eventually the Egyptian visitors, themselves, like the Egyptian exhibit, became subsumed by the European gaze — objects to be appreciated for their unusual nature.

Might foreign visitors to the Slum Theme Park, presented with a depiction of poverty and squalor which supposedly represents their home environments, not go away with similar feelings of resentment? But perhaps these foreign visitors do not matter after all. Like the Paris exposition of almost a century and a half ago, those who matter most are the local people. This time they are having the world of poverty brought to them to experience in their own backyard.

REFERENCE NOTES

I would like to thank Prof. C. Greig Crysler for his “Cities, Space and Power” class, which helped me conceptualize this article.

3. According to the tour guide, the Fullers had lived the American dream until they were threatened with divorce. In an effort to save his marriage, Millard Fuller gave up all his wealth and decided to devote the rest of his life to doing Christian charity work with his wife. This not only saved their marriage, but it also was the start of Habitat for Humanity.
10. Peggy Compton, personal interview.
11. Liston, “Theme Park.”
15. Peggy Compton, personal interview.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Global Village and Discovery Center promotional video.
25. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
35. Ibid., pp.1-5.
36. Ibid., p.13.
39. The term was coined by candidate George W. Bush during the 2000 presidential campaign. It is now enshrined in his administration’s language with regard to issues of social concern. Repeated reference to it may be found on the White House website and in presidential speeches.
41. Ibid., p.99.
45. Ibid., p.19.
46. Ibid., p.57.
48. The term “creative destruction” was actually coined in 1942 by Joseph Schumpeter in his work, Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy, to denote a “process of industrial mutation that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one.” It builds on Marx’s idea of creative destruction, which very broadly discusses the destructive power of capitalism and its view that in order to create something you have to destroy something. Schumpeter used the term “creative destruction” in his criticism of Marx.
50. Ibid.

All images are by the author except where otherwise noted.